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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: CODEL SMITH MARCH 21-24 VISIT TO CAIRO: MEETING
WITH ISLAMIC, JEWISH LEADERS

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During his March 21-24 visit to Egypt, Senator Gordon Smith called on Sheikh Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi, Egypt's senior Islamic spiritual leader, and visited the President of Cairo's Jewish community. With Tantawi, Smith reaffirmed U.S. respect for Islam and discussed the mutual desire to promote tolerance and cooperation. With the head of the Jewish community, Senator Smith agreed to explore ways U.S. groups might help preserve and protect Egypt's Jewish heritage. The Senator had also sought a meeting with Pope Shenouda, leader of Egypt's Coptic Christian community, but the Pope was unable to meet the Senator. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Senator Smith's March 23 courtesy call on Sheikh Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi, who, as Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, is one of Sunni Islam's most prominent spiritual leaders, was characterized by warmth. Welcoming Senator Smith to Cairo, the Sheikh gave him a brief overview of Al-Azhar as an educational and theological institution. The Senator thanked Sheikh Tantawi for having repeatedly rejected the use of Islam to condone intolerant ideologies and acts of violence. "I speak out against this (phenomenon) because it is my solemn duty," affirmed the Sheikh. Senator Smith assured Tantawi that the American people and the USG understand the difference between Islam as a noble and virtuous religion and those who would subvert its message for evil purposes.

¶3. (SBU) The Sheikh asserted that Islam views all mankind as descending "from the same father and the same mother" and underlined that "differences in creed in no way preclude cooperation between peoples." Tantawi recalled that Al-Azhar had condemned, unequivocally and publicly, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the same day they occurred. He described the 9/11 attacks as vile crimes that killed men, women, and children, Americans, Egyptians, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and others, without discrimination. "Such an attack is against all religious teachings, and all religions are innocent of such a crime," he stated. The Senator thanked Tantawi for his "message of encouragement and healing."

¶4. (SBU) Subsequently, Dr. Ali Saman, an advisor to Sheikh Tantawi, briefed Senator Smith on the progress of Al-Azhar's interfaith dialogue initiatives, highlighting formal dialogue agreements already concluded between Al-Azhar and both the Vatican and the Anglican church. Senator Smith encouraged these efforts.

¶5. (SBU) Immediately after his visit to Al-Azhar, Senator Smith visited the Adly Street synagogue in downtown Cairo. Carmen Weinstein, the President of Cairo's dwindling Jewish community, which she estimated numbers less than 100, offered the Senator a tour of the synagogue and adjacent library, which houses a number of precious manuscripts. Weinstein lamented the decline of Cairo's Jewish community, which had once numbered 80,000. Most of the community left during the tense times that followed the 1956 and 1967 wars, she noted, although Weinstein asserted that more could have opted to remain and assume Egyptian nationality, as her father did. Weinstein told the Senator she is now focused on establishing an international trust that can preserve and restore Egypt's many historic Jewish artifacts and structures. Senator Smith offered to explore possibilities with U.S. groups and individuals that might be interested in working with Egypt's Jewish community on such a project. Weinstein noted that some in the Jewish community in America were trying to have Egypt's Jewish artifacts sent to the United States for safe keeping, but underlined her vehement opposition to this proposal.

¶6. (U) CODEL Smith did not have an opportunity to clear this message before departing Egypt.

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